

Created to Become Like Christ  
40 Days of Purpose  
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We are marching right along in our 40 Days of Purpose journey. For those reading along in “The Purpose Driven Life” by Rick Warren, you should be around chapter 22. But don’t worry if you’ve fallen behind. I’d rather you take your time and absorb what you’re reading than feel like you have to rush through it. I promise there’s no pop quiz at the end and you won’t get detention if you don’t finish by Easter.

In our sermons together we’ve been looking at God’s purposes for us. First, we learned that we were planned to bring God pleasure. That’s worship. Then we learned we were formed for God’s family. That’s fellowship. Think of worship as our vertical connection to God, and fellowship as our horizontal connection to each other. When you put those two lines together, you get a cross, which points us toward God’s third purpose for us: We were created to become like Christ.

The undeniable, biological fact is that most children usually end up looking like their parents. Those DNA strands work together to form a creature that resembles its creators. Most people think that my daughter Sydney looks a lot like me, but I’m still hoping she’ll grow out of it. It’s amazing how she can look like me but still be so pretty.

What’s true in biology is also true in theology: we are created to look like our creator. We learn that in the creation story in Genesis, when God said to the Heavenly Host, “Let us make human beings in our image and likeness.” We were created to resemble God, to reflect God’s image.

What is that? What does the full image and likeness of God look like? It looks like Jesus. Disciples pastor Fred Craddock puts this so well that I’m going to quote him directly. Craddock says, “What is God like? Here’s the answer: Jesus. Do you remember that time when there was a crowd gathered to hear Jesus and they were a long way from home and hungry, and Jesus fed them? That’s what God is like. Do you remember when he took those little children on his lap and blessed them and talked to them and talked to their parents? That’s what God is like. Do you remember when the leper came up to Jesus and said, ‘Please help me,’ and he was made clean and healed? That’s what God is like.”

Craddock continues, “I don’t want you to think that to be a Christian you have to believe in God and then add Jesus. You do not add anything; it is Jesus Christ who tells us who God is. This is the kind of God in whom we believe.”

If we want to know what the full image and likeness of God looks like, all we have to do is look the life of Jesus. Paul says in Colossians that Christ is the image of the invisible God. He came to make God real to us, so that we would know the image in which we were made. The passage from Romans tells us that from the very beginning, long before the world was even created, God’s purpose has been to make us like His Son. God wants to take us from wherever we are, and bring us through a lifelong process of change that will result in us becoming more and more like Jesus Christ.

We will not become a god, but we will become godly. God wants us to become like Christ in his character, thinking and acting as Christ would. He is our model. Look at what he loved and hated; watch how he treated people; observe how he responded in

different types of situations. As incredible as it may seem, God's purpose is for your life to look like that.

We have the same kind of goals for our own children, don't we? My and Leigh's goal for Sydney and Molly is for them to become mature, responsible adults. And that's a long process. For some, a very long process. We're very pleased and proud the persons they are becoming. But we have no illusions that the job will be complete any time soon. We realize we have years of work ahead of us, teaching them by word and by example, disciplining them, answering their questions, shaping their characters. And that's how God works in our lives. He loves us as we are, but he doesn't leave us as we are. He is continually at work in our lives to make us more and more like Christ.

It's important for us to understand that, if God is shaping us to become like Christ, then everything we go through is a part of this process. God uses all kinds of experiences, all kinds of people, and all kinds of situations to shape and mold our character. Pleasant and unpleasant. Expected and unexpected. Easy and difficult. Enjoyable and painful.

Romans 8:28 tell us, "In all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." In all things. Not just in most things. Not just in the things we have control over. Not just in the things whose benefits we can see and understand. But in all things, God is working for our good, to accomplish His purpose in our lives.

Now, as I understand it, that doesn't mean God causes all things to happen. But God works through them. God works through an illness to bring spiritual healing. God works through a death to bring restored relationships. God works through a job loss to bring unforeseen opportunities. God works through a disaster to bring caring and support and a sense of hope.

God can work through everything in our lives to make us more like Christ. On the cross, what Satan meant for evil, God meant for good. God took the worst deed in history and turned it into the greatest victory. If God can wrest such triumph out of the jaws of apparent defeat, if God can draw strength from a moment of ultimate weakness, what might God do with the apparent hardships and failures in my own life? When faced with trials we are tempted to ask, "Why me?" But a better question might be, "What can God do with this?"

If we are to truly become like Christ, that means we will experience in our lives some of the same things Christ experienced, because it is through these circumstances that God can bring about a Christ-like character. That includes things like loneliness, temptation, stress, criticism, rejection, and other problems. Christ dealt with all of these, and so will we. We do not live in Heaven. We live in an imperfect world. It's a simple fact that no one goes through life without facing their share of trials.

That's why James' words are so important. He says, "consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." Paul echoes this thought in Romans when he writes, "We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us." God works through our trials to produce in us a Christ-like character, which results in a hope stronger than any darkness. Like a caterpillar struggling to escape the cocoon, when we

persevere through our struggles we are transformed by God's grace and God's constant presence with us.

Rick Warren makes an excellent point about how God uses these kinds of circumstances to make us more Christ-like. The Bible tells us that a Christ-like life is evident when it produces the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We are to learn these characteristics as we become more Christ-like.

But the only way we'll learn these is if we have chances to put them into practice. It's easy to be loving when you're around people you love, but you truly learn to love when you're around unlovely people. It's easy to be kind when you're around gracious people, but you truly learn to be kind when you deal with people who don't deserve your kindness. We learn joy in the midst of sorrow. We learn peace when we don't have control. We learn patience when things don't happen on our timetable. God works through unlovely, unjoyful, ungentle circumstances to teach us love, joy, and gentleness.

Warren says that everything that happens to you has spiritual significance. Every situation you are in is a chance for to grow in your Christ-likeness through the decisions you make and the way you choose to respond to others. Each day you are presented with another opportunity to follow the lead of Christ and reflect the image of your Creator.

Of course, we won't always do this. No one is perfect. We are a work in progress. Our spiritual transformation in developing the character of Jesus will take the rest of our lives, and even then we won't become perfect. Paul says in Colossians, "You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of the creator."

Each day we are called to make the conscious choice to claim the image of God within us, no matter how imperfectly we reflect it. Every day is an opportunity for us to put on our new self, the one that God has given us, the one that looks a lot like that guy from Nazareth. Do you want to know what God looks like? Look at Jesus. Do you want to know what Jesus looks like today? Look around.